White House Hits Reports Of 'Slapping' by Nixon

By Carroll Kilpatrick
Washington Post Staff Writer

KEY BISCAYNE, Fla., Nov. 19—The White House today condemned as "unethical and unprofessional reporting" news accounts that said President Nixon slapped a man at McCoy Air Force Base outside Orlando, Fla., Saturday night.

The alleged victim described the President's action as "a friendly gesture" and a "tap" on the cheek.

Today's Wall Street Journal reported that Mr. Nixon "soundly slapped the man's face and walked on" after the incident, which took place after a presidential news conference.

Reports of the incident "distorted a friendly gesture," a White House statement said.

"This is an example of irresponsible and twisted accounts which have been circulated in recent months, without adequate substantiation and which create false impressions concerning the President of the United States," the statement said.

"The motives of those who generated the rumors and those who wrote these stories can only be explained by the reporters involved."

MSgt. Edward K. Kleizo, a 50-year-old Air Force veteran with service in Vietnam, said today, "This is the greatest honor I ever had; to shake the hand of the President is a great privilege. To have the President tap you on the cheek — I won't wash my face."

Asked if his son, John, 7, had not gone through the airport terminal saying "The President slapped my daddy," Kleizo replied: "Yes, he did, but he didn't mean it that way."

Kelizo said he had told Mr. Nixon he was "one of the greatest presidents we've ever had" and the President reached over and tapped his face — "Like a pat you give a basketball player after he's made a basket."

The so-called slapping incident came to light Sunday when one of the pool reporters on the President's plane told his colleagues what he had seen Saturday night.

There followed an angry debate in the White House press corps because the pool reporters had made no mention of the incident in the written pool report Saturday night. The pool reporters maintained that there was no significance to the incident, but late Sunday night they wrote a pool report and posted it in the press room here.

The Wall Street Journal, The New York Daily News, and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch filed stories although the wire services, television networks and the majority of newspapers represented decided that there was insufficient basis for a story.

"Two members of the Saturday night pool observed an encounter that they thought at the time was insignificant and still do," Sunday night's pool report said.

As the President was shaking hands with spectators lined up along a fence he approached a short, balding man and his son," the report said.

According to the pool reports the man said that the President asked: "are you the boy's mother or grandmother?"

"Neither," he replied.

"The President craned his neck for another look," the report said. "Bright flood lights at the airport might have affected his vision.

"'Of course not,' said the President. At the same time the President spoke he delivered a light slap to the man's face."

The two pool reporters said that "the light slap had the velocity that a man might use in slapping shaving lotion in his own face. . . . The President did not appear to be angry, but may have been flustered by his mistake in identity. The President then went on to pose for pictures with a baby."

When one of the pool reporters asked the man what had occurred, he replied: "The President slapped me," The reporters then ran to board Air Force One, without getting the man's name.

But his picture appeared next day in the Orlando Sentinel because he was next to the mother with the baby who was photographed. Kleizo's identity became known today.

Reached by telephone, Kleizo said he had used the word slapped, adding: "You don't say 'the President tapped me.'"

When his son was asked about the incident, he said the President "thought he was my grandma, it was so dark and a spotlights in his eyes."

Was your father hurt? a reporter asked. "No, I was laughing because I thought it was funny," John replied.

Kleizo said no one from the White House staff had talked to him about the incident or the news reports. Mrs. Kleizo said a lieutenant colonel had contacted her husband. Kleizo said no one told him what to say when questioned about the incident.

Asked if Mr. Nixon seemed to be angry, Kleizo replied: "Oh, no, at no time whatsover. No way. Impossible."

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Moments after the President allegedly slapped him. M. Sgt. Edward K. Kleizo, left center, is all smiles as he hands a baby to Mr. Nixon at McCoy Air Force Base in Florida. Kleizo later described the "slap" as a friendly tap.